Sermon 3-3-19

Paul Purdue preaching

**Awake and Standing Firm**

It was a sad walk... seven miles from the Holy City. It was finished, the chanting crowds’ shouts still, and Jesus’ disciples scattered to the wind. Let’s put ourselves on that road, we might be struggling to see Jesus inside our denomination. When asked, “what happened?”, we might stumble for words, stand still, and look sad or pop off. Grief steals our best words.

What happened to us? Well, Methodist delegates from 136 nations gathered to make our rules, and a little better than half voted to double down on the denominational prohibitions against LGBTQI marriages and ordination. Stephen Ray, president of Chicago Theological Seminary, said the General Conference’s sinful decision “unequivocally (and incorrectly) declares that baptism is an insufficient qualification for the full exercise of membership in the Church.” We failed our own baptismal theology  “that we are all incorporated in God’s mighty acts of salvation, and that all of this is God’s gift offered to us without price.” Let me be clear, Belmont’s Executive Committee finds that graceless teaching incompatible with Christian teaching.

Ancient writing space on Luke’s leather scroll was precious, so notice carefully the physician’s prescriptive words: “Cleopas and his friend were talking about everything that had happened. As they were walking and talking, Jesus, the Risen One, came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing Christ, even as when the Hidden Jesus asked, ‘What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?’” Do you know that Jesus is going with us- right now- even if the news is about to crush you?

On Tuesday night, Belmont’s Executive Committee gathered even as General Conference ground to a halt, so the monster trucks could take over the St Louis arena! We wept together and affirmed our resolve to live out God’s to uphold God’s calling upon us. We see our Welcome Statement as our guiding star: “We believe every person is of sacred worth and created in God’s image. We commit to Jesus’ example of inclusive love, care, and intentional hospitality with persons of every race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, faith story, physical or mental ability, economic status, or political perspective. We respect our diversity of opinion and expressions of faith. Therefore, as God loves us, so let us love and serve in the name of Christ.”

As we prepared to leave, Jennifer Bagwell spoke, “It was hard to walk into the building tonight, but to come into this room and see your faces”… the tears that crept into her eyes seemed to focus her resolve as she leaned into the circle… “to walk into our church and see your faces filled my heart with joy, for this is our church, our hope, and together we will be okay.”   Good Friday is never the last word. Slavery was not the end when the exiles hung up their harps by the rivers of Babylon. We say with Dr. King, “Our God is able to make a way out of no way. Jesus goes with us, even when we can’t see God. When Jesus hands us the keys to heaven to loosen and to bind the rules, Jesus promises ‘where even two or three of you gather, I will be with you’.” (Matthew 18) Often God shines in the face of church friends.

I love how the hidden Jesus plays dumb, prompting the disciples to share their stories, “What are you talking about?”  Healing comes as we walk and talk together. There is no holiness apart from social holiness. By some holy mystery healing occurs as we release our rage or pour our tears out inside the safety of a circle of trustworthy disciples. Do you hear the anger in Cleopas’ reply, “Are you the only visitor to the Holy City that is unaware of what took place over the last few days?” I considered setting up some money changer tables for us to flip over in a righteous-anger workout. Or perhaps a sacred figtree for us to all curse. We hear in the Psalms how much God longs for us to pour out our hearts. Remember how the Crucified One cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And somehow, in honest release, God comes alongside to hold us like the tenderest mother. Say whatever you feel; God knows already and loves you no matter. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Luke gives a lot of printspace to the wounded ones, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know … the things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet, mighty in deed and word before God and us, and how our chief priests and leaders handed Jesus over to be crucified. Oh, we had hoped. We had hoped that Jesus was the one to heal our broken nation.   And besides that, some women from our group astounded us. They went to the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that Christ is risen! We sent a delegation to the tomb; but they did not see Jesus.” Let’s dwell in that.

The things breaking their hearts were about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet. The church always has trouble with prophets.  We get the law. We love some rules. We struggle to catch the Spirit! Indeed, we kill the prophets, “Woe to you, religious experts and lovers of rules, hypocrites! For you build churches honoring the prophets, and say, ‘If we had lived back in the day, we would not have killed that prophet.’ Jesus roars, “You testify against yourselves. God sends you prophets, sages, and teachers, some of whom you will crucify, and some you will rip apart in church trials, and others you will drive out of the pulpits in the name of your spiritless orthodox.” (Matthew 23) Most of the Bible is about people encountering the divine grace or the prophetic voice challenging the civil religion. The Bible is not a book of rules! The prophetic edge kills no one.

Hear the deep pain as the two on the Emmaus highway tell “how our chief priests and denominational leaders handed Jesus over to be crucified.” When church leaders fail us, it deepens the wound. The sins of St. Louis have harmed so many, in ways we will not even understand, until Jesus’ perfect love washes away every tear. Many of us who are trying hard to share faith, hope, and love are stunned by General Conference and wondering who will now not walk into the church? What couples will never invite God into the center of their marriage? Who will believe the accusers, you know, Old Scratch’s lie that God made a mistake when God made them queer? What lost soul will read the headlines and wonder if all God cares about is sex?  Friends, our Creator dwells beyond sex as does love. Marriage is about love. Marriage is about holding a partner’s hand at a parents funeral, or unpacking a moving truck, or laughing about some twentieth-times-told family tale. I can’t believe that our Creator, who made us in the Divine Image, cares who we kiss on the mouth.

But we had hoped that…  that line crushes me. Hear the Good News: Jesus is listening to us even as our dreams are deferred.

“And besides all this, there’s more: Some women from our group stunned us. Early this morning they went to the tomb early and told us they had seen a vision of angels proclaiming, “Christ is risen!” Some of  us checked it out, but did not see Jesus.” Hear the stunning news inside the Minority Report: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! The church almost always votes the very minority reports that God sends to save us! It will take the United Methodist church until 1956 to woman preachers, ordained by Jesus and sent by angels...full clergy rights. Should we go on to talk about the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles, the earth rotating around the sun, or the abolition of slavery?

Now Jesus, having just ordinated those sisters earlier that morning, does not take too kindly to the church discounting their voices, so the unseen Jesus roars, “Oh, how dull you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!” Oh, dull of reason and hardhearted around experiences we are. How we struggle to catch the spirit! This is strange for we have a New Covenant, a New Testament, and a New Commandment to love each other. And yet we love the old wine and resist the Spirit that tends to ferment new understandings that stretch us.

Listen as Jesus corrects our bad theology: “Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then enter into God’s glory?” Our market driven, need-fulfillment, consumer church will always struggle to understand redemptive suffering. If we come to church “to get something out of it”, we will not forget to pick up Jesus’ cross that saves us. We will make the cross into a token to get into Heaven, instead of a tool to build God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about the Christ within the scriptures. Twice in the chapter, Luke speaks of opening us to God, Jesus opens our eyes and opens our minds to understand the scriptures! Jesus comes even today to rupture old wineskins and lead us into new understanding. The Spirit still speaks. Let us catch the Spirit!

A seven-mile hike with Passover gear likely took the better part of the day, so I love how Jesus pretends to go on. But they urged Jesus-Come-As-Stranger strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So Jesus-Yet-Unseen went in to stay with them. Jesus promises to appear when we welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, shelter those without homes, clothe people, forgive enemies, make peace, protect immigrants, absorb insults, stand up for justice, listen to the downcast, release the oppressed and the like. So friends, if you want to see Jesus revealed, drive the van to pick up Golden Triangle teenagers, pass out popsicles at Pride, write a message of love on our sidewalk, work with homeless, sing in the choir, teach children, come converse with an ESL student, engage with NOAH, go to the capital Wednesday at noon for Open Table’s Ash Wednesday service, join advocacy, raise your voice, help us build an outdoor Stations of the Cross, and then some Instagramable art that incarnates our Welcome Statement, tutor at Edgehill, take Communion to a shut-in, go with a team to Mexico, help plan a children’s event for our neighbors, and, oh yes, John Pearce reminds us that we need to give if we want to keep offering an inclusive witness to our neighbors. Jesus will show up.

As we may struggle to see Jesus inside our denomination right now, perhaps Lent’s arrival on Wednesday comes as a gift of grace. Maybe we need 40 days to grieve and discern. Maybe the wilderness will help us ponder how our resistance to the evil prospered in St. Louis. Let us be bold but not rash. We need time with God and each other in order to heal, weigh, and plan our best response. We need the wilderness spiritual testing ground so that in our resistance to evil, we do not become overcome by the practices we deplore. But hear this my LBGTQI friends, you are made in the image of God! And God’s image does not dwell in something as mundane as gender. God’s call is limited by anything and a Christian marriage is about grace and inviting God into the center of a partnership, not who you kiss on the mouth. If you want a next step, reach out and offer support for an LBGTQI person, hang a rainbow flag in your window, pray, and come help live out our Welcoming Statement. We need your help. And know that even when it seems that Jesus is hidden…. Jesus goes with us.

And so, when Jesus-Come-As-Stranger was at the table with them, as Jesus took the bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus; and the Risen One vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while the crucified one was opening the scriptures to us?”

And I love Luke’s closing, for after walking away from community, and not believing the minority report these two once downcast disciples run seven miles back to Jerusalem. There the church is crowing, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” It is okay to groan a bit that the church believes the one whitish man, not the three women. And then our two friends tell what had happened on the road and how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. And  while they were talking about this, Jesus, fully God and fully us, stood among them and said, “Peace be with you,” and then he breathed forgiveness upon them and sent them out to change the world.

Friends, we know who we are. We know what God is calling us to be. We know our denomination comes right now as a cross, but know that Jesus has a Good Friday way of making a way out of no way. So let us talk to each other. Release our anger and hurt at this altar. Listen to the prophets. Welcome the stranger, do justice, love mercy, and trust that Jesus will show up in our midst. Amen.